

HERE'S my STORY

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A LANTERN IN A QUAGMIRE

RABBI BETZALEL KINN

I first met the Rebbe in 1962, as a result of my association with Rabbi Nachman Sudak.

I had recently become religious in 1958 and connected with Chabad in London, where Rabbi Sudak worked as the Rebbe's emissary. I have a very inquiring and skeptical mind, and Rabbi Sudak knew how to speak to me. He never tried to pacify me with simplistic answers, and I really appreciated the time and care he took in answering my questions.

It was Rabbi Sudak who told me about the Rebbe. He said that the Rebbe was a very holy man who had a deep understanding of secular matters as well.

At first, I was not interested in meeting him. The rumors I heard that the Rebbe could work miracles made me suspicious — was he a charlatan or a trickster? But my curiosity got the better of me.

I remember walking into 770, the Chabad World Headquarters, and the Rebbe turning to look at me. It was as if he saw right through me, and I felt like such a fool for having had the thoughts I'd had about him. I almost wished that the earth would open up to swallow me whole.

But that didn't happen. The Rebbe smiled at me, and I sensed an aura of spirituality around him but, even more than that, an aura of goodness.

When I went in for my personal audience with him, I had with me the piece of paper on which I had been instructed to write my questions. My first question concerned my Hebrew name, which is Betzalel; I was supposedly named after my grandfather whose name was Solomon, so I wanted to know if I was using the wrong name.

The Rebbe invited me to sit down, and even before I handed in my questions, he asked me, "What is your Hebrew name?"

"It is Betzalel, but I think that must be wrong," I said, and



I explained about my grandfather.

"If you were called up to the Torah with the name Betzalel and on your marriage contract it said Betzalel, then there is no question that your name is Betzalel," he responded.

"But the name written on my grandfather's grave marker is Solomon."

"The grave marker can be wrong," he said without any hesitation.

And I'd just like to say here that afterwards I did a lot of research and I found out that, in fact, my grandfather was called Zelke, which is an abbreviation for Betzalel, or actually Betzal-kel, because people often added a "k" to prevent pronouncing G-d's Name even when it was part of a person's name. This was shortened to Zelke and Anglicized to Solomon. When I checked the burial register, my grandfather's name was recorded as Betzalel, which the Rebbe had told me, without doing any research.

The second question I asked him was about what path

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MY ENCOUNTER
with the REBBE

An oral history project dedicated to documenting the life of the Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, of righteous memory. The story is one of thousands recorded in over 1400 videotaped interviews conducted to date. These stories are based on the recollection of the individuals recounting them. Please share any corrections, comments and suggestions. mystory@jemedia.org

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my career should take. I began with, "I know that I'm not religious enough to teach Jewish children," and when I said that, he laughed. He actually laughed merrily, his eyes twinkling. And then he said, "If you wait until you are perfect, it will take a long time. So get on with it. If you don't fulfill your mission in this world, when Mashiach comes, he will ask you why you didn't do what you were sent down to earth to do. Make no excuses — get on with it."

"But I am more comfortable teaching secular subjects," I countered.

"So teach secular subjects in Jewish schools," he responded, adding that I should consult with Rabbi Sudak just how to go about it.

He closed with this advice, referring to my only having become observant recently: "Because you fell in a 'quagmire' and lived, you will lead others through the quagmire with a lantern in one hand, pointing out the stepping stones with the other hand. You will get them across to a good place. That is your job."

I came out of that meeting totally energized. I felt that if the Rebbe said that I can teach Jewish children, no one — but no one — was going to stop me from teaching Jewish children. I resolved to devote my life to the Jewish community and the Rebbe's vision.

Once I embarked on my chosen career, I had occasion to write to the Rebbe several times to ask for advice. I recall that in one letter he sent me a monograph about the Menorah in the Temple. And he explained that any Jew can light the Menorah. The Kohen, of the priestly class, must clean the wick and supervise the lighting, but really any Jew can light the lamps. The important thing is not to remove the fire before the lamp is burning on its own. So I wrote to the Rebbe to make sure I understood what he was telling me: "Do you mean I have to look after my students until their light can burn on its own, because they need my knowledge and support until then?" And he replied, "Yes."

I had also asked, "What happens when they grow up, do I let them go?" And he answered, "Only when you've done your job — only when their light can burn without you."

So I realized that this is a job for life that I accepted. Today, I still sometimes get phone calls from my former students — including a few who truly do need my

emotional support — and I remember the Rebbe's words.

Another time, I had a question concerning student discipline. I'm very hot tempered, and I used to give the kids a good smack when they deserved it, and in those days it wasn't considered to have a negative effect. But then there came a time when this approach to discipline was frowned upon. So I turned to the Rebbe for guidance.

He wrote me a very wonderful letter. He said, "It is now the fifteenth of Shevat, the New Year for the Trees, and the sign of life is slow, steady growth. Look at an oak tree — it takes three hundred years to mature. And just think of a seedling. You put it in the ground, and it starts growing a little bit. It is still very small. If you damage it in any way, you will have ruined it. You have to remember that."

When I got that letter, I started to pray that I should never make any of my students worse. I knew that I would not make them perfect, but I certainly didn't want to make them worse — I didn't want to damage them in any way.

In the end I have to say that the Rebbe's advice about education were the most exceptional that I have ever received. As I grew older I realized that this was one of the greatest people that ever lived. He certainly was no charlatan — but more so, he knew me through and through.

Rabbi Betzalel Kinn was a teacher from the mid 1950s until 1977. He also ran a Chabad center in Thanet, England, from 1964 until 1974. He was interviewed in his home in Manchester, England, in March of 2015.

לע"נ ר' ישראל יעקב וזוגתו מרת קריינא ע"ה לאקשין
ע"י בניהם ר' נחמן ור' אברהם ומשפחתם שיחיו

This week in....

> **5725 - 1965**, the Rebbe instructed the administration of the Lubavitcher Yeshiva in 770 to publicize to the students, letters of the Previous Rebbe regarding the importance of studying Tanach (scripture), the cantillation marks for the Torah reading, and Jewish history. Several days later, the Rebbe followed up to make sure that this was indeed being done.¹ 2 Adar I

1. Personal diary of Rabbi MM Wolf.

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Hadassa Bracha and Ella Chaya

By their parents **Dina and Menachem Kranz** and
family

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